

Core Principles of High Quality Local Assessment Systems

Assessment in Relation to School Culture

The word assessment comes from the Latin “to sit beside”. In this context, assessment might be viewed as thoughtful reflection. In a school setting, this reflection is sometimes done in the company of the student, sometimes by the teacher alone, and sometimes by the student alone.

Understanding how assessment information is used in a meaningful way to improve student learning needs to be a part of the systemic culture of the school. This approach to local assessment as part of the school’s culture will require a moving away from the notion of assessment as judgment and competition toward a vision of assessment as reflection **that can improve classroom instruction**. It will also require a shared responsibility and empowerment of teachers, administrators, school specialists, and students in the process.

Shared Expectations for Student Learning

The content standards and performance expectations for a school’s local assessment system should focus on skills and understanding that are most important, and shared by teachers throughout the school, by teachers and their students, and by the school and parents.

Research suggests that a successful system of standards-based assessment is coherent in three fundamental ways. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment all align with the standards, targeting the same goals for learning and working together to support students’ developing understanding (**horizontal coherence**). All levels of the system (classroom, school, district, state) possess a shared vision of the goals of education, of purposes and uses of assessment, and of the criteria for competent performance (**vertical coherence**). Finally, the system needs to take into account how students’ learning develops over time. Learning progressions, descriptions of successively more sophisticated ways of thinking about an idea and laying out in words and examples what it means to move toward more expert understanding establish **developmental coherence** (National Research Council, 2006).

In Vermont, *Grade Expectations for Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities* clarify learning goals for both state and local assessment systems. The Grade Expectations (GEs) were developed to provide a guide for the assessment of skills and concepts in ten content areas. They provide specific statements of the Vermont standards and guidance for local curriculum, instruction and learning. Together, the Grade Expectations provide a basis for horizontal, vertical, and developmental coherence within a local assessment system. At the same time, teachers and schools are challenged in striking a balance of assessment and instruction across multiple content areas. Is there a process by which schools can make informed decisions regarding the purpose and range of local assessments in relation to Grade Expectations ?

Most importantly, teachers, administrators, and other members of the school community need to engage collaboratively in the decision making process, with ongoing dialogue about the relationship between learning goals and assessment. Finding the time and opportunity for collaboration is a significant challenge for a school. When such dialogue becomes part of the school’s culture, significant rewards come in the form of continuity, professional development and improved student learning.

The process itself should be based on two fundamental assumptions.

1. Vermont Grade Expectations represent focused, coherent, and developmentally appropriate learning goals for students. They should be the primary source for assessment constructs.
2. The local school community is in the best position to make informed decisions regarding the prioritization of Grade Expectations for assessment and instruction.

Question 1: How will the school community choose to prioritize achievement targets based on local vision, values and data - driven understanding of what children need to learn in our school?

All GEs were developed to address important skills and concepts. However, a school might choose to identify certain GEs, clusters of GEs, or cross cutting skills within GEs that will receive proportionately more instructional and assessment emphasis than other learning goals. In an effort to prioritize learning goals, teams of teachers might identify opportunities for integration within content areas first and then move to cross-content dialogue in an effort to identify universal themes such as those described in the *Vital Results of the Vermont Framework*. Any process of prioritization should reflect a consensus of the school community.

Question 2: How will teachers align their instructional curriculum with the broad range of GEs as well as those designated for higher prioritization?

Web based alignment tools and other similar resources may assist teachers and schools in aligning curriculum, assessment and instructional practices with Grade Expectations. A curriculum mapping effort will highlight gaps in assessment and instruction. The resulting data will inform the prioritization of learning goals.

Question 3: How will the school ensure that learning goals are clear and understood by teachers, students, and parents?

If schools invest the time and energy in clarifying shared expectations for student learning, subsequent decisions regarding assessment design, balance of classroom and school assessment, balance of formative and summative assessment and the use of assessment information will be more purposeful and productive. Making expectations clearly visible to the entire school community is a critical first step in ensuring horizontal, vertical, and developmental coherence throughout the local assessment system.

The Role of Formative Assessment in the Local Comprehensive Assessment System

Formative assessments are intentional activities undertaken by teachers and by their students that provide information to guide instruction and learning. Formative assessment:

- should be embedded within the teaching and learning of important content knowledge.
- should be an integral part of good instruction, not a separate activity.
- should be based on the principle that all students can learn if assessment feedback is used effectively to inform instruction and learning.

These assessments might yield quantitative data such as student work scored according to a rubric or they might take the form of a verbal question and response that reveals student thinking. The common feature of all formative assessments is that student responses point to an intervention that will move students to a higher level of skill or understanding. As is the case with Shared Expectations for Student Learning, support for formative assessment needs to be a part of a school's culture if the goal is to build a system in which failure is not an option.

School leaders should not merely allow innovations related to formative assessment but actively empower teachers to share ideas and take risks. Additionally, leaders need to acknowledge that change occurs through support over time and commit time and resources needed to develop and use high quality formative assessments.

An informed decision making process regarding formative assessment might include the following questions.

Question 1: What is the role of the school principal in supporting formative assessment?

The principal is the “point person” who will communicate within, across and outside the school community. He or she needs to promote the unwavering vision for formative assessment and student learning while guiding a concrete plan for implementation of the vision. The principal will ensure that implementation of the formative assessment plan is a priority. He or she plays a critical role in providing the time, professional development, and opportunities for collaboration that are critical in making full use of formative assessment. Some additional questions that might be valuable in guiding the process include:

- How will the vision for formative assessment be created, shared, and implemented?
- Is there a leader in the school who is in a role where he/she can make changes in moving toward a vision?
- What are the roles of various levels of administrators (school board on down)?
- How does a formative assessment initiative fit in with other initiatives already in place?
- What system is in place to support students who are struggling in school?

Question 2: What is the role of a teacher in supporting formative assessment?

Teachers need to focus on what students are learning and use that information to guide teaching. Success is reflected in the quality of the learning that takes place, not in the perceived quality of the teaching. When planning and implementing formative assessment, teachers should reflect upon cognitive research in the content area and feedback from students and colleagues. Teachers need to create a safe classroom environment that values all learners. In this community of learners, there is a shift from competition and judgment to collaboration and learning oriented motivation. To accomplish these objectives, teachers need to take a risks and empower all students to take responsibility for their learning. Some additional questions that might be valuable in guiding the process include:

- Where do we want each learner to go?
- Where is each learner now?
- How is each learner going to get there?
- What resources are available to me (as a classroom teacher) when the assessment feedback indicates that a student is not making progress?
- How do we create a community of learners?
- Why should I (as a classroom teacher) want to change what I do?
- What is stopping/has stopped me from changing?
- How do we empower students to take charge of their learning?
- How do we use our assessments to inform instruction?
- Have we communicated the learning goals to our students in appropriate ways?
- Do our students have a clear understanding of the criteria for success?
- How do we teach our students to revisit work and keep working to improve performance?

Question 3: What is the role of students in supporting formative assessment?

Students need to believe that they are responsible for their learning not just for receiving an adequate grade. They need to believe that with the support of teachers and peers, they can learn and meet standards. They need to be willing to collaborate with peers effectively, be open-minded to all learning opportunities, participate in reciprocal learning roles with teachers and peers, and recognize that they are part of a learning community.

Some additional questions that might be valuable in guiding the process include:

For teachers:

- What is stopping/has stopped students from learning?
- What do students believe about their potential for learning and learning in general?
- Do students have the time, opportunity, and ability to reflect on their learning and themselves as learners?
- Do students know how to use their learning styles and interests to learn in the most efficient manner?
- What motivates individual students to learn?

For students:

- What am I supposed to be learning?
- Am I getting “it”?
- What will I do if I don’t get “it”?
- How will I demonstrate that I understand “it”?
- How will I share my knowledge with other students?

The Balance of Classroom-based and School-based Assessment

The Vermont School Quality Standards call for a balance of both classroom based and school based assessment. At the classroom level, formative assessment reflects individual student “learning in progress”. Beyond the classroom, the school based system needs to generate feedback that enables teachers and other members of the educational community to determine consistency in meeting shared expectations for student learning across all classes and grade levels. A comprehensive assessment system encompasses both classroom and school-based assessments.

Analyzing assessment data can identify strengths and needs in the performance of individual students and groups of students. The results of such analyses provide an essential foundation for planning ways to improve the achievement of all students. Assessment data, whether it is large scale NECAP data, aggregated school assessment data or samples of student work, are used to guide instruction. An objective analysis of assessment data is key to a data driven dialogue that results in improved instruction. Teachers must be involved in the collaborative analysis of the entire range of assessment data included in the local comprehensive assessment system.

Question 1: What evidence of student learning will provide rich feedback for collaborative data analysis?

Data are required to identify patterns of growth and instructional needs across classrooms in the school and across schools in the district. Data at this level can identify specific achievement gaps for sub groups of students and support decisions regarding instructional programs, resources, and professional development. In Vermont, some schools have developed common assessment tasks that are administered to students across classes in a grade level. These school-based assessments might vary widely in format (i.e. portfolio assessment, mid or end of the unit/course assessment, culminating project, etc.) but they share common characteristics. Because they tend to be summative in nature and administered less

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frequently than ongoing classroom assessments, they should target fundamental knowledge and real world application of skills and knowledge. They require a level of validity and reliability that will ensure confidence in resulting decisions.

Question 2: What steps will we take to ensure a level of confidence in our school data?

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the feedback derived from common assessments, they need to align closely with the learning goals designated by the school for higher prioritization. Teachers and others responsible for scoring common assessments need to use common, agreed upon criteria for student expectations, scoring scales or rubrics, and benchmark performances in order to make consistent judgments about the quality of student work.

Question 3: What supports are in place that will allow for productive data driven dialogue?

The National Research Council cites three key elements that need to underlie any assessment or assessment system. There needs to be a model of student *cognition* and learning in the domain (Grade Expectations), a set of beliefs about the kinds of *observations* that will provide evidence of students' competencies (assessments), and an *interpretation* process for making sense of the evidence. Providing time for collaboration, ensuring shared ownership of student learning, and developing community wide assessment literacy will lead to productive dialogue. It is the analysis and interpretation of assessment feedback that will ultimately determine the effectiveness of the assessment system.

Systemic Supports for Local Assessment

Research and best practice identifies five characteristics of effective systemic support for local assessment. Within the system, there needs to be:

- support from a strong leadership team committed to allocating time and resources in achieving the school's vision for the local assessment system:
- time and resources devoted to the initial and ongoing development of the local assessment system:
- time devoted to staff collaboration:
- appropriate professional development opportunities for teachers and other educators:
- a plan that allows for the gradual implementation of new approaches to assessment that build on existing resources.

Question 1: How will the culture of the school affect the development of the local assessment system?

These guidelines for developing high quality local assessment systems began with the recognition that the characteristics of a school's culture "the way we do things around here" will ultimately determine the success or failure of any new initiative. Teachers and administrators need to work together over time to strengthen the connection between the school's culture and the developing local assessment system. For example, if the school lacks a tradition of collaborative working relationships, teachers and administrators may need to engage in team-building efforts and professional development aimed at strengthening collaboration skills. As schools engage in the self assessment activities recommended in **Shared Expectations, Question 1**, it might be productive to include questions that relate directly to school culture. Some examples include;

- Is there a common vision about teaching and learning? Is it articulated for all to see?
- In what ways and with whom do we work collaboratively?
- What indicators demonstrate that we are a vibrant learning community?
- What is the teacher's role in and responsibility to his/herself, his/her students, and to the parents?
- What outcomes are we working towards that align with the vision?

- What is our responsibility to our community at large?
- How do we make decisions in this school (school-wide, team, classroom levels)?
- How do we use assessment data to drive instruction?
- Do we (teachers, students, administrators, parents) feel safe enough to take risks and fail? Why or why not?
- What are our school norms?
- Does the leader trust his or her followers?
- Are there clear lines of communication between all stakeholders in this school/district?

Question 2: Does the system allow for a smooth transition from old to new?

As new or revised student expectations, assessments and instructional strategies are developed and implemented over time, it is important to ensure that students already “in the system” are not put at risk through the transition. Once again, open communication and collaboration among teachers, administrators and parents will prevent this type of unintended consequence.

Question 3: Does the system allow for adequate professional development of educators?

Ongoing conversations in which teachers share their experiences and receive feedback while trying new assessment practices need to be an important component of the school’s professional development plan. These structured opportunities to give and receive feedback on professional practice have a strong positive impact on student learning. In addition, schools and districts need to provide opportunities for all teachers to attain an adequate level of assessment literacy. Aspects of assessment literacy professional development include:

- understanding assessment for learning versus assessment for evaluation:
- basic understanding of the technical aspects of assessment including types of assessment, purposes, validity and reliability in the context of local assessment:
- collaborative scoring and examination of student work:
- analysis of various types of assessment data:
- backward mapping approach to assessment development:
- alignment of assessment targets to Grade Expectations.

Question 4: How will parents and the larger school community become informed about the local assessment system?

In addition to clear reporting strategies, schools need to communicate the vision and goals of the developing local assessment system with the community. Mechanisms such as school board and PTA presentations, newsletters, and open house provide existing venues for garnering this level of support.

Bibliography

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